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ABSTRACT

This document introduces a new school accountability mechanism, the Accountability Dialogue. An Accountability Dialogue brings together educators, parents, and the larger school community to: (1) establish standards for school and student performance; (2) determine how the school is doing in relation to those standards; (3) investigate the conditions that contribute to the school's strengths and weaknesses; and (4) plan how to address the areas where improvement is needed. The Western Assessment Collaborative worked for 5 years with a set of districts and schools in their efforts to implement standards-based reform. By drawing on a multiplicity of perspectives and sources of data, Accountability Dialogues acknowledge, rather than ignore, each of the challenges raised by large-scale external accountability systems. At the same time that Accountability Dialogues accelerate the implementation of standards and facilitate the use of data to plan improvements, they also upset the traditional ways in which educators have related to parents, the community, and one another. The greatest promise of Accountability Dialogues lies in their potential to strengthen the relationships that are essential to sustained school improvement. Appendix A contains a checklist for planning and conducting Accountability Dialogues, and Appendix B contains overheads to introduce concepts of accountability and Accountability Dialogues. Appendix C contains materials for assisting participants to look at student performance data. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

Accountability Dialogues

School Communities
Creating Demand from Within

Kate Jamentz

WestEd

Accountability Dialogues

SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Creating Demand from Within

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Contents

Introduction

The call for greater school accountability will not be ignored. Journalists, politicians, parents, educators, policymakers, and the public are all weighing in on the theme. Presidents and governors are elected on promises to sanction low-performing schools and reward successful ones. Mayors promote former military leaders to run their schools, and new superintendents earn their stripes by promising to "clean house" and rid the system of ineffective school leaders. States threaten to take over low-performing school districts, districts to reconstitute or reassign the staff of low-performing schools, and schools to withhold diplomas from or retain students deemed unsuccessful. Top-down accountability sends a clear message — "someone must pay."

Not surprisingly, this call for accountability has created considerable unrest in the educational community. Critics of the public school system attribute this unrest to what they see as the long-standing unwillingness of educators to accept responsibility for the quality of schools and student performance. Many educators, on the other hand, acknowledge the need for greater accountability, but question the fairness of many recently enacted plans and caution against their unintended consequences. Recently adopted plans reinforce the idea that accountability is something "done to" educators rather than a value sustained from within the system and by the individuals who work there.

A New School Accountability Mechanism

This document introduces a new school accountability mechanism, the Accountability Dialogue. An Accountability Dialogue brings educators, parents, and the larger school community together to establish standards for school and student performance, determine how the school is doing in relation to those standards, investigate the conditions that contribute to the school's strengths and weaknesses, and plan how to address those areas where improvement is

FIGURE 1

From Accounting to Accountability

Assessment for ACCOUNTING

"*Accounting* refers to the act of gathering, organizing, and making available for use any of a variety of information describing the performance of the system."

Assessment for ACCOUNTABILITY

"*Accountability* takes that information and uses it to inform judgements about performance *and* how it can be improved — including planning and action."

ACCOUNTABILITY DIALOGUES

"The goal is to involve various constituencies in the construction of deep and commonly held understandings about the performance of the system, the reasons for the performance, the best possible ways of improving performance, and the responsibilities of each in doing so."

– *Paul G. LeMahieu, "From Authentic Assessment to Authentic Accountability"*

needed. Accountability Dialogues are forums through which schools and the larger community strive to become partners in the effort to assure that every student achieves to high standards. The dialogue is conducted on the premise that this process of professional and public engagement will help schools develop a sense of internal accountability that will guide continuous improvement.

Under the auspices of the Regional Educational Laboratory at WestEd and with generous support from the Stuart Foundation, the Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC) has worked for five years with a set of districts and schools in their efforts to implement standards-based reform. Accountability Dialogues have served an important role in these efforts.

In supporting schools to conduct Accountability Dialogues, WAC borrows heavily from the work of Dr. Paul LeMahieu, currently Hawaii Superintendent of Education. LeMahieu challenges schools to move beyond the practice of merely "accounting" to the public about school performance and to understand "authentic accountability" as the act of taking responsible action to improve performance. In the belief that not only educators, but also parents and the community as a whole must take steps to assure that all students achieve to high standards,

LeMahieu urges schools to conduct public engagement processes designed to *"construct deep and commonly held understandings about the performance of the system, the reasons for the performance, the best possible ways of improving performance, and the responsibilities of each in doing so"* (LeMahieu 1996) (see Figure 1). Taking up this challenge, schools and districts in WAC's Kysosei[1] project have conducted over 25 dialogue sessions to date.

Acknowledgments

This document describes how Accountability Dialogues have stimulated the implementation of standards-based reforms as well as what has been learned about the promise and challenges of this accountability mechanism. In presenting these findings, we wish to commend and thank the staffs and communities of the following California schools and districts for their pioneering efforts with Accountability Dialogues:

- Parkside Elementary and Bayside Middle School, San Mateo-Foster City School District;
- Sedgwick and Stocklemyer Elementary Schools, Cupertino School District;
- Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Wilson Elementary Schools, San Leandro Unified School District;
- Montair Elementary School, San Ramon Valley Unified School District;
- Irvington High School, Fremont Union High School District;
- International Studies Academy High School, San Francisco Unified School District;
- Galt Joint Union Elementary School District; and
- San Mateo-Foster City School District.

Thanks, too, to the staff of the Western Assessment Collaborative who supported these districts and schools in this work and contributed a great deal to

[1] The word *kyosei* is Japanese for cooperation. The project name was inspired by an article by Ryuzaburo Kaku in which the author urges companies to adopt not only a commitment to improvement, but an understanding of their responsibility to the larger community in which they function (Kaku 1997).

this publication. They include: Mary Camezon, Lori Van Houten, Gina Jaime, John Larmer, and Trudy Schoneman.

In addition, we must acknowledge the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), whose 83 leadership schools conducted Accountability Events as part of their participation in the Hewlett-Annenberg Challenge.[2] The stories in the pages that follow draw on what has been learned from those with whom we have worked closely, as well as from sharing our work with the BASRC schools.

It is important to note that we are reporting our work with Accountability Dialogues in midcourse; at this writing the impact of these conversations must be considered promising, but incomplete. Our goal at this juncture is to provide school, district, and community leaders with a vision of what it looks like to bring the accountability conversation to the local level, and, in doing so, to create what we believe can become a powerful vehicle for generating continuous school improvement.

[2] WAC at WestEd designed and conducted professional development on implementation of standards-based reform and Accountability Dialogues for BASRC schools.

PART ONE

Why Accountability Dialogues?

While accountability is becoming a fact of life for schools, some serious questions need to be addressed about the validity of typical accountability measures and their usefulness in improving the educational system.

Because accountability is both so important and so often misunderstood, schools and school communities often need a way to communicate about local needs, to clarify understandings about how school and student progress will be assessed, and to agree about how to proceed. Over the past five years, Accountability Dialogues have been used by some schools to do just this.

Serious Questions about Large-Scale Accountability Systems

The current accountability movement has brought a new and much needed sense of urgency to the demand that America's schools meet the needs of all students. In the last five years, twenty-seven states have instituted new accountability systems (Quality Counts 1999).

Although accountability plans differ from state to state and district to district, most rely heavily on scores from large-scale student achievement tests, administered once a year, to determine school quality. Some factor in additional indicators such as dropout and attendance rates or teacher qualifications. In some plans, the consequences of inadequate performance are borne by individual students who are retained at grade level or not permitted to graduate; in others, principals lose their job or see their entire staff "reconstituted" in transfers to and from other schools. Some plans include consequences for students and administrators alike. Still others provide incentives or rewards to schools or teachers who produce exceptional improvement. Some plans require, and fund, specific interventions for individuals or schools not performing adequately, while others make no provisions for support.

Critics of these accountability plans typically cite one or more of the following arguments in opposition to them:

- They are not based on a commonly accepted definition of what a good school is;
- They weigh too heavily the scores from a single assessment;
- They fail to acknowledge that student performance is influenced by factors stemming from outside the school;
- They do not account for the time and expertise needed to build capacity in the system to address certain kinds of problems;

- They rely only on external accountability mechanisms; and
- A number of unintended consequences may harm rather than help students.

A Question of Quality: What is a good school?

The pervasiveness of the call for accountability might lead one to assume that a high degree of clarity exists about what we are looking for in "accountable" schools. Yet the often heated debate about accountability plans suggests that no such clarity exists. Should a school be judged by the degree to which students and parents are satisfied with their school experience? Or by the degree to which a school's graduates succeed in the world beyond school? Or by some other kind of measure?

Although there seems to be general agreement that the quality of student performance is an important indicator of a good school, there is little agreement about how such performance should be judged. Should the quality of a school's or individual student's performance be represented in relation to a fixed standard? in terms of the degree of progress toward that standard? in terms of a ranking in relation to all other students or schools? in relation to students and schools with similar needs and similar resources serving similar student populations? And, if all of these should be taken into consideration, how should they be weighted to determine the quality of school performance?

The range of answers to these questions reveals ideological differences about the purposes and goals of schooling that confound any easy attempt to provide an absolute definition of a "quality" school. Yet, without a shared understanding of what quality means, it is difficult to hold anyone accountable for it.

A Question of Measures: What data should be used to determine quality?

One of the loudest criticisms of most state- and district-level accountability systems involves their over-reliance on a single means of measuring student performance — which usually means large-scale, standardized tests. These measures

are valued by the general public for providing reliable and objective comparisons of students across schools, districts, and states. But educators often complain that these tests, given only once a year, provide an inaccurate or incomplete picture of student performance. Numerous opponents claim the tests are biased, favoring students of certain cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, the results of these tests are reported in terms of rankings — thereby guaranteeing that some students and schools will always be at the bottom.

For the last two decades, educators and researchers have made many attempts to invent new assessments designed to provide a richer and more accurate picture of student performance. They envision, and in some cases have developed, assessments that measure performance in relation to absolute standards and ask students to demonstrate that they can solve complex problems like those they will face in the world outside school. Many have argued that these measures should replace, or at least be used in conjunction with, traditional testing programs.

A Question of Responsibility: Just who is responsible for improving student performance?

The call for increased school accountability raises questions about the degree to which schools can actually influence student performance and, therefore, should be held accountable for that performance. Researchers have continually noted that the strongest predictors of student achievement are non-school factors such as the level of parents' education and income, the size and stability of the family, and the wealth and stability of the community. Many educators have long complained that they should not be held accountable for student performance when so many factors that influence it lie outside their control.

Additionally, accountability plans are often criticized for not building in consequences for all parties whose work influences student achievement. Teachers wonder why parents are not held more accountable for supporting student learning, and how students might be held more accountable for the role they play in their own learning. Principals, whose jobs are on the line in certain accountability systems, cry foul when district leaders are not held similarly responsible for making schools successful.

A Question of Capacity: Do schools have what they need to make improvements?

Some focus their criticism of new accountability plans on what they see as a minimal investment in building the capacity of the system to improve:

> *We see accountability plans that include plenty of consequences for poor performance and little if any help to improve performance.... They seem to be premised on the idea that the problem is school professionals who know what to do, but refuse to do it. That is certainly not our experience* (Tucker 1998).

While some cheer top-down accountability systems for their strong stance, others criticize these carrot-and-stick approaches for what they see as a failure to recognize and provide what's needed in terms of time, resources, and expertise to make the required improvements.

A Question of Motivation: Can commitment be mandated?

Underlying the current accountability frenzy is a quiet but restless debate about what motivates schools and the individuals in them to change their practice and adopt successful strategies. Proponents of strong external accountability systems generally believe that external mandates themselves bring about improvements. Yet many others believe that developing an internal sense of responsibility for improvement is essential to the success of any accountability system.

Michael Kirst, a professor at Stanford University and Co-Director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), points out that many different state-level accountability systems have been tried and abandoned with little lasting impact on student performance. The reason, he suggests, has to do with a radical misreading by the creators of such systems — usually policymakers far removed from the classroom — of what motivates educators to improve their practice. Much research indicates that teachers are motivated not by external rewards or sanctions, but by satisfaction in seeing their students succeed at doing meaningful work. Consequently, says Kirst, if an accountability system has any chance of working, it must "build internal accountability that will match external accountability."

A Question of Consequences: Will these new systems actually benefit students and increase student learning?

Finally, countering the public enthusiasm for new accountability systems is a Greek chorus warning of their unintended and potentially counterproductive consequences. Commentators argue that systems developed by state policymakers may "shift the educator's focus from serving the needs of students to serving the will of the state legislature" (Schmoker 1999). The results, they warn, will include a narrowing of the curriculum to those skills measured on state tests, a dangerous sameness to the learning opportunities teachers offer, and a mass exodus of dedicated, creative teachers from the profession. Where some foresee that accountability systems will galvanize schoolwide efforts to improve performance, others predict that they will make it increasingly difficult to find excellent educators to work in the schools and with the students who need them most.

The most vehement criticism comes from those who fear that the consequences of these systems will be visited unfairly upon students:

> *The standards movement is a strategy which uses kids as burnable matter in the process of improving things.... The whole spirit of the present standards-and-test game is the spirit of top down: "We know what to do, here it is, you guys do it, and we'll give you a test." ... And it really hurts when the kids haven't had a chance to learn what's coming* (Robelen 2000).

Little data are yet available about how these various new accountability systems will play out for teachers or for students. Nonetheless, the accountability movement rushes ahead with considerable public support.

Accountability Dialogues: A New Way of Thinking about Accountability

To some, the term "Accountability Dialogues" is an oxymoron. Typically, accountability is seen as a system that affixes blame and initiates action from the top down. The school board calls the superintendent on the carpet for low test scores; the superintendent mandates new expectations and targets for the improvement of schools; principals plan a course of action that makes new demands on teachers; and teachers turn to students with increased emphasis on the areas identified for improvement.

By contrast, Accountability Dialogues are designed to foster community-wide conversations that welcome the voices of individuals at all levels of the system — teachers, administrators, students, parents, employers, representatives from institutions of higher education, community leaders — and provide them with opportunities to share diverse perspectives and proposals (see Figure 2). Together they construct deep and shared understandings of the system's performance, the usually complex reasons for that performance, and the various ways in which that performance might be improved. The goal is to develop a sense of shared responsibility and collective action, to generate accountability without blame (see Figure 3).

By drawing on a multiplicity of perspectives and sources of data, Accountability Dialogues acknowledge, rather than ignore, each of the challenges raised by large-scale, external accountability systems. The aim is not to simplify the complicated issues surrounding student performance, but to engage stakeholders, including the students themselves, in examining those issues. Accountability Dialogues do this by creating a community forum that focuses on the work of the school, while acknowledging that the success of that school is enhanced by the support of those within the larger school community. These dialogues are a mechanism for joint problem solving aimed at moving the

FIGURE 2

Stakeholders in an Accountability Dialogue

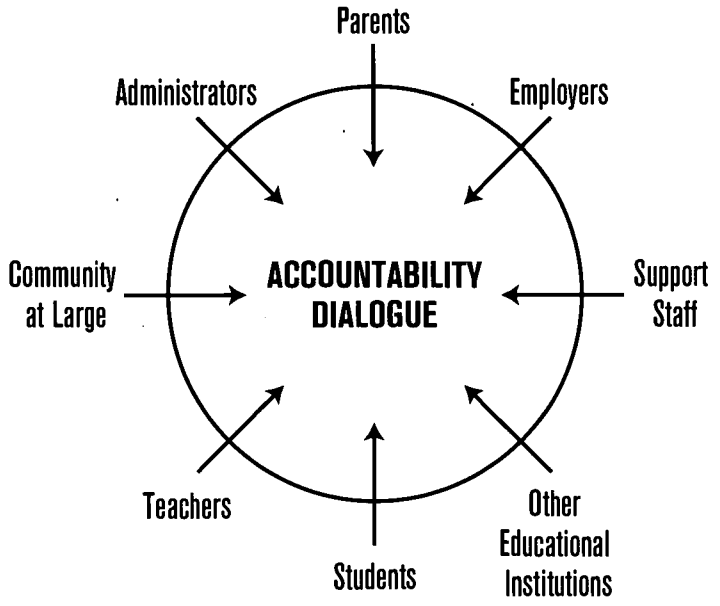

FIGURE 3

New Ways to Think about Accountability

Not ...	*But ...*
Blame	**Responsible Action**
Reporting	**Dialogue**
Hierarchical	**Lateral and Shared**
Only External	**Also from Within**

school community away from superficial solutions and toward a culture of continuous improvement.

Accountability Dialogues make possible a positive response to a set of highly charged issues:

> *The current political climate creates enormous pressure for politicians and school leaders to define accountability in its most derogatory sense by laying blame and taking quick, strident, and highly public actions. Such actions are perhaps a tempting catharsis. But, although strong changes are often needed within the organization, lasting accountability cannot be achieved from the bully pulpit.... Improving performance and responsiveness within an organization requires cooperation and problem solving. The first step in solving problems is identifying them. When the central concern is finding individuals to blame, no one will bring problems forward, making it all but impossible to find constructive solutions to even the most basic issues* (Tacheny 1999).

Accountability Dialogues bring the accountability conversation home from the state capital to the faculty room or school auditorium. They acknowledge that accountability is a value developed and nurtured through relationships. They recognize that while measurement and management systems are the tools of accountability, the ultimate success of any accountability system depends on individuals whose daily practice is motivated by a personal commitment to their students, their colleagues, and their community.

PART TWO

What Schools Are Learning about Accountability Dialogues

Accountability Dialogues propel efforts to implement standards-based reforms and at the same time strengthen the relationships among parents, educators, and the community at large. But the benefits to schools do not come without challenges. Hosting these dialogues requires careful planning and a good deal of time from already busy educators. Fostering new relationships with the community sends educators into uncharted territory. Schools look to a variety of strategies for promoting participation among diverse constituents and for assuring that the time spent pays off in a stonger program and improved student performance.

Accountability Dialogues Propel the Work of Standards-Based Reform

Accountability Dialogues are designed to create a public and professional forum through which a school community determines what quality of performance it will require of its students, how that level of performance will be determined, and what actions might be taken, and by whom, to improve student achievement.

Through Accountability Dialogues, schools have

- negotiated agreements on what students should know and be able to do;
- built strong assessment systems and established performance standards;
- come to better understand the conditions that contribute to or inhibit student achievement; and,
- increased their sense of urgency and efficacy to improve student achievement.

Establishing Agreements about What Students Should Know and Be Able to Do

Typically, states establish standards by convening educators and content area experts who are charged with the task of determining what students should know and be able to do in a given subject area. The resulting lists of "content standards" are approved by the state board of education and distributed for use by districts and schools statewide. These content standards are intended to serve as the backbone for the development of a state assessment system designed to measure school and student progress on these same skills.

Not surprisingly, these lists are often found problematic at the local level. Because local educators usually have had little or no input into the creation of these standards, they feel little sense of commitment to them. Often educators and community members criticize the vague terminology or "educationese" of

the state-developed standards. Complaints from all quarters characterize these documents as wordy laundry lists of anything anyone might consider worth knowing — and as failing to emphasize those things that are really essential.

Accountability Dialogues operate on the assumption that in order for educators to teach effectively to standards, and for the community and parents to support them, the standards must be understood and adopted at the local level. Dialogues bring educators and community members to the table to forge agreements regarding what they want all students to know and be able to do.

The standards developed in Accountability Dialogues acknowledge external guidelines about what is important for students, but at the same time reflect negotiated local values. State standards and those developed by professional organizations become valued resources used to balance local interests with externally validated points of view. For example, participants in Accountability Dialogues in one district examined the state mathematics standards related to problem solving and decided to expand on those standards for their own students.

One magnet-school community used its standards-setting process to communicate its interest in and commitment to arts education. When the state and district provided content standards only in academic areas, the school convened staff members, together with professional artists, parents, students, and community members, to construct standards for music, drama, and the visual arts. Teachers wrote descriptions of how students would make progress toward these standards and then shared the drafts for feedback at an Accountability Dialogue.

In another school, a dialogue that focused on understanding state test scores raised issues about important writing skills that were not being tested. Parents and teachers reviewed state test results and expressed concern that these scores gave them no information about students' abilities to compose coherent narratives and reports, and gave students no information about how to assess the quality of their own work. As a result of the dialogue, school efforts focused on developing a writing assessment program and on working with parents to communicate the importance of them helping their children develop self-assessment skills.

Parents as "Critical Friends"?

Parents conducting classroom observations? What's that all about? At Montair Elementary School in the San Ramon (CA) Unified School District it wasn't about "teacher shopping." It was about being "critical friends." As the result of the school's Accountability Dialogue, parents were invited to visit classrooms in order to collect data and give the faculty feedback on the consistency with which standards were being implemented throughout the school.

Montair has held a series of seven Accountability Dialogues looking at the school's writing program. Early sessions looked at the district's standards for writing and the alignment of the school's assessments with those standards. Together parents and teachers studied data from both norm-referenced state tests and the district's direct writing assessment. "We just weren't satisfied with the results on the state test," reported one parent. "When compared with students nationally, Montair students always do well. But in order to meet our standards in writing, we want to know that kids can actually write something." Students brought refreshing perspective to the conversation, noting that some tests go beyond measuring learning and actually promote it. "I like the SAT-9 because it's easy," one child reported to the room full of parents and teachers, "but on the writing test, my teacher can show me what I did wrong."

"We as parents just want to know what is expected and what we can do to help our kids," one parent explained. "The dialogues helped us a lot there. We got to see the rubrics, look at papers at the various levels, and think about, Does my kid's work look like this?"

But the data suggested that not all students were equally prepared to write well. Prompted by the facilitator at one dialogue session, parent, student, and teacher participants offered a set of hunches about why that might be true:

- Maybe some teachers do not use the language of the rubric to communicate expectations to students.
- Maybe some students come to their present grade with very little experience in writing.
- Maybe some teachers interpret the rubric differently than others.
- Maybe some teachers give students more opportunities to practice writing than others.
- Maybe some parents are not able to help their child at home.

Together, dialogue participants decided to address their hunches in two ways. In order to investigate consistency across classrooms, participants agreed that they needed information from observers who could visit many classrooms and talk to students. The faculty agreed to allow parents into their classrooms as data collectors. Participating parents agreed not to identify specific teachers by name, but to report on whether students were familiar with the rubric, whether scores seemed consistent across classrooms, and how much writing students did in class.

To attack the problem on the home front, parent participants asked for strategies about how to help their children work on writing at home. Parents and staff agreed to collaborate on the design and dissemination of a newsletter that illustrated ways parents could promote good writing and work with students at home.

"This is such a new way of thinking about working with parents," said Susan Buck-Gordan, Montair's principal. "I never would have believed the teachers would go for it. But I think the dialogues have helped us build a spirit of trust and commitment to get better. It's been about, What can we all do?"

Through local school dialogues, the community often comes to recognize the importance of assuring that both students and parents understand the standards well. One principal reported, "One of the things we decided in the dialogues is that we as a staff were going to translate the standards into 'kid talk' so that students would have a clear understanding of what they needed to know and how they would demonstrate their knowledge of it." A teacher at another school noted that one of the goals emerging from the dialogues was to "make the targets [i.e., the standards] explicit to kids. If the target was something they always had in mind, then they could reach it." As a result of parent feedback at an Accountability Dialogue in one district, the district developed a parent version of the district standards, carefully ridding the text of education jargon.

Building Strong Assessment Systems and Establishing Performance Standards

Large-scale state assessments are designed to reliably measure how schools and students are doing in comparison to one another. They are usually given once a year and are designed to cover a subset of the content standards approved at the state level. These tests generally rely on multiple-choice formats that are quick and relatively inexpensive to score but that do not assess students' ability to compose their own responses to problems. Data provided by these assessments are not available to the school until months after the test is administered. And parents and teachers alike complain that the data are reported in confusing formats using terminology that is difficult to understand.

In order to enrich the picture of performance provided by state-level standardized tests, educators often use a variety of classroom assessments or other diagnostic performance measures designed to measure achievement in relation to content and performance standards. These measures offer rich and timely information to teachers and schools about what students can do with what they are learning, but they are often criticized for providing unreliable analyses across groups of students from different classrooms or schools.

Accountability Dialogues have helped catalyze the development of assessment systems that provide both credible snapshots of how students are doing in

comparison to one another, and richer, more complex diagnostic information that tells what students can do and how they need to improve. Several schools have used their dialogues to present data from a variety of student performance measures, and to discuss the purposes, strengths, and limitations of each (see Figure 4). Parents talk with educators about why they want to know how children are doing in relation to one another. Educators illustrate how they use diagnostic measures to guide instructional planning. Out of the conversation comes recognition on all sides of the need for a range of measures and a willingness to honor and invest in meeting the assessment needs of all those whose efforts contribute to improved student performance.

Dialogues have also driven improvements in the reliability of classroom measures. As one teacher said, "The dialogue showed us that staff development around assessment was the missing piece. So we began to have discussions such as whether a three on my rubric means the same as a three on yours. We also came around to making formal agreements about how we were going to administer and evaluate [classroom] assessments."

In another district, an Accountability Dialogue focused on how teachers and schools should weight different assessment results in establishing the performance standards for a given subject area. Discussion focused on the value that should be given to once-a-year state assessments and to those given at the district or classroom level several times a year. The community established performance standards in reading, writing, and mathematics that drew on a variety of measures, including both those that provide highly reliable comparative data and those that provide timely diagnostic information at the classroom level.

Increasing Understanding of the Conditions That Contribute to or Inhibit Student Achievement

In an Accountability Dialogue, the community brings together multiple sources of data and multiple perspectives for the purpose of understanding not only how many students are or are not achieving to standard, but also the conditions that may be contributing to that performance.

FIGURE 4

How Good Are Our Data?

Assessment data should be credible and useful. The following questions can help to evaluate any assessments that provide student performance data.

Validity

Does the information come from a procedure (or set of procedures) that actually measures what it sets out to measure?

Reliability

Is the information trustworthy?

Fairness

Does the information result from procedures that are appropriate for people of all backgrounds and needs?

Usefulness

Are the data useful to those decisionmakers who need it to do their work well?

Appropriateness of Use

Are the data used fairly and appropriately?

Dialogues are often used to examine student achievement patterns that may be masked by summary reports providing only aggregate or average scores. At one school, for instance, participants discovered that while schoolwide achievement was adequate, achievement levels dropped significantly in the fourth grade. In the dialogue, participants generated hypotheses about possible causes. Perhaps fourth grade teachers — many of whom were new — were less familiar with the reading program than were other teachers. Some parents asked if there was adequate parent involvement at the fourth grade level and if the teachers needed more parental support to improve achievement levels. The dialogue led to a spirited but productive exchange of views. "I valued the opportunity to really discuss what is happening in important areas of student achievement," one parent said.

In more than one school, low overall scores in reading resulted from extremely low scores in one aspect of reading comprehension. "The breakdown of reading comprehension [as it was examined in the dialogue] showed me the areas I need to address with my students," declared a middle school teacher. In another school, similar discoveries in the data surfaced concerns about the

The Power of the Informed

Despite a significant investment of time and energy in developing a set of districtwide performance standards and an assessment system to support them, a new majority on the district's Board of Trustees threatened to disregard six previous years of work!

The strategic plan developed by the San Mateo-Foster (CA) City School District in 1994 had called for the development of a set of assessments to be used, along with the state assessment system, to determine whether students were achieving to grade-level standards. District leaders consulted with experts and convened teachers to investigate a number of assessment options. Determined to draw on both norm-referenced measures as well as assessments that provide strong diagnostic information to classroom teachers, the district crafted a set of measures and reliable scoring processes for each. They then hosted districtwide Accountability Dialogues in order to explain the rationale for use of each instrument and to get input on how the scores might be combined to determine grade-level performance standards. Approximately 100 parents, teachers, administrators, and community members attended each of three four-hour sessions.

Meanwhile the district and school site leaders conducted professional development sessions to assure that all teachers learned how to administer each assessment and to use the results to plan instruction and improvements in the school program. Parent meetings were conducted at each school to answer questions about how the assessment results would be used for individual students.

But in the fall of the 1999 school year, some board members demanded school-level achievement targets focused solely on the state's norm-referenced test. District leaders feared that overemphasis on a one-time measure — and one that was not well aligned to the district's standards, to boot — would undo their many years of effort to build a richer assessment system.

The board room was overflowing with parents and teachers at both sessions set aside to discuss the school-level achievement targets. A teacher offered a simple metaphor to explain what he had learned by participating in the Accountability Dialogues: "When a coach takes over a new ball club, he doesn't just look at their win-loss record and scream, 'Work harder!' He reads statistics, he looks at film, and he figures out what kind of help they need. That's the idea behind diagnostic kinds of assessments." Later a parent rose to represent a number of other parents who had attended the Accountability Dialogue sessions. "We think it is irresponsible," she read, "to ignore the input of the many parents and staff who participated in the Accountability Dialogue events, who informed themselves about the purposes and uses of assessment, and who gave input to the design of districtwide performance standards."

By the end of the evening, the public outpouring had an impact on the board, and they agreed to a set of achievement targets that drew on both the state assessment system and the locally developed student performance standards.

scarcity of reading materials available and prompted admissions that teachers lacked expertise in teaching some of the more technical aspects of reading. The dialogue resulted in specific actions to purchase the appropriate materials and to provide focused professional development for the teachers.

Student involvement in the dialogues can also provide key insights. At one high school, for example, there was intense concern over low scores on the state-mandated standardized test. At an Accountability Dialogue, students speculated that test scores were lower than expected because many students believed that the test was of no consequence to them and had therefore not taken it seriously. Parents and teachers alike used these comments as a jumping off point to examine how they communicated with students about the test and its purpose, and to consider the ways in which they might motivate students to do their best.

Increasing a Sense of Urgency and Efficacy to Improve Student Achievement

When faced with troublesome patterns of low student performance, school personnel can often feel overwhelmed. Not surprisingly, some succumb to blaming forces outside the school — "the district," "parents," "society," or the students themselves. These schools can become paralyzed by their low expectations of themselves and of their students. The variety of perspectives and sense of shared responsibility nurtured through Accountability Dialogues create not only a sense of urgency for improvement, but, equally important, an awareness that working together increases everyone's chance of success.

In one high school dialogue, attention focused on the concern that 40 percent of all freshmen had GPA's under 2.0. When additional data revealed that many of these students were reading at three to four grade levels below that of the texts used in freshmen classes, plans were set in motion to work with the middle and elementary schools to strengthen articulation of standards for student performance at all grade levels. In addition, participants called for more immediate action to address the needs of the high school's current students. As a result, the school made plans to purchase more materials at appropriate reading levels

What If You Gave an Accountability Dialogue and Nobody Came?

Wilson Elementary School's first Accountability Dialogue was held on a Saturday, in hopes of making it easier for working parents of the San Leandro (CA) Unified School District to attend. Despite the fact that the principal and a small group of staff members had planned the event carefully, they were all a bit afraid of what might happen. The data they had to share did not paint a rosy picture of student performance, and they were genuinely concerned about how parents would react to it.

They needn't have worried. Hardly anyone showed up. Discouraged but unwilling to give up, the planners rethought what it might take to get parents to attend such an event. And most importantly, they talked about how to encourage the involvement of a variety of parents, especially those whose children were doing poorly in school.

The planners decided to ask each teacher to target five parents with a personal invitation to attend. They encouraged the teachers to call those parents with whom they had had the least contact all year, and the principal supplied teachers with a script that they could use to describe the event. Wilson's second try at an Accountability Dialogue was scheduled on a Wednesday evening, and flyers were sent home in English, Spanish, and Cantonese inviting parents to an event called "Parents and Teachers Together: An Honest Look at Wilson's Reading Scores and Other Information about Our Students and School." On the second try, the Wilson community drew 140 participants, including a large percentage of the staff. Asked why they voluntarily attended, staff members admitted that they could not afford to miss out. Said one teacher, "When so many parents expressed interest in coming, we knew we had to be there!"

What hadn't changed — to anyone's satisfaction — was the student performance data. Teachers, parents, district leaders, and school board members studied information showing how students performed on the state test. They also looked hard at other data, such as attendance, discipline patterns, homework return rates, frequency of reading at home, and parent satisfaction with various aspects of the school program. Together participants speculated about what needed to be done to improve student performance. Parents suggested the need to organize volunteers to read with students on a regular basis, expressed concern about the low attendance and homework return rates, and asked for more information about what was expected of students. Teachers expressed the need for better and to participate in professional development designed to help teachers learn to teach reading skills through their content areas.

A similar story emerged from an elementary school where a look at student performance data at a year-end Accountability Dialogue revealed unacceptably low reading achievement. When some participants suggested that the school begin an investigation of available professional development opportunities, others voiced their impatience and called for action that would "get something up

assessments and clearer performance standards, and for opportunities to learn better strategies for teaching reading.

Spurred by this well attended dialogue, the Wilson staff addressed parents' needs for better communication in the following ways:

- Staff shared the expectations for student performance with parents at Back to School Night;
- An information hotline was set up for parents in English, Spanish, and Cantonese, and additional funds were allocated to provide translators at all school events and at parent conferences when needed;
- Student performance data were shared at parent conferences and the urgency of attending to low performance was emphasized; and
- A new program was instituted to encourage parents and family members to read together on a daily basis.

Also as a result of input from the dialogue, the staff agreed to reallocate resources to target low performing students:

- Students with the worst attendance and/or tardiness records were identified and staff were assigned to communicate with those students' families on a daily basis and to target counseling and social services to those families as needed;
- Monthly meetings of support staff were instituted to assure that students participating in more than one of these programs receive coordinated services;
- The school's Title I program was restructured so that students would no longer be pulled out of their regular classrooms, but would instead receive extra support before and after school; and
- Services to English learners were restructured by grouping students with similar levels of language development.

Following the dialogue session, every participant was sent a summary of the event and a list of how the questions raised there were being addressed.

Wilson's persistence in the effort to engage large numbers of diverse representatives from their school community continues to pay off. An Accountability Dialogue in the fall of 1999 brought out another 130 participants. Free childcare, the addition of a Korean translator, and plenty of snacks to fuel hungry participants contributed to the evening's success. Looking back on the event, one key planner commented, "Planning this dialogue was like planning a family wedding — just as complex, and just as rewarding!"

and running by the start of the new school year." Working from the energy created in the dialogue session, the school contracted with experts from a local university and, with their help, designed a year-long professional development plan in reading that involved weekly modeling of effective teaching strategies, individual teacher coaching, and all-staff training sessions each week.

At this writing, student achievement at Wilson Elementary School is on the rise, although staff remain frustrated with their inability to close the achievement

gap between middle-class students and those who are low-income, English learners, or students of color. While no one is claiming that Wilson's promising gains are a result of the school's Accountability Dialogues, these events nonetheless have motivated the staff to persist in their improvement efforts. Cindy Cathey, Wilson's principal, comments: "We have an amazing, committed and dedicated staff. The Accountability Dialogue helps them reflect on their practice and refocus on what they can do differently to close the achievement gap."

In one rural school district, an Accountability Dialogue served as a forum for a group of typically disenfranchised parents to share their interests and needs. Spanish-speaking parents in great numbers used the session to communicate their sense of urgency in seeing their children learn English, their desire to learn English themselves, and their need for more information about how they could better help their children at home. District leaders who might otherwise have passed up a grant opportunity to fund after-school programs immediately applied for those funds. As a result, an evening program for parents and their children was established. At this writing, 50 families have participated, with 60 more on a waiting list.

In sum, Accountability Dialogues have played an important role in propelling the work of school improvement. They have provided a forum through which administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and students come together, often for the first time, to look deeply and purposefully at how the school is doing and what can be done to improve it. Stories abound about the ways in which these conversations have generated or strengthened important commitments, provided common learning experiences, or guided action at the school level.

Accountability Dialogues Challenge Traditional Roles and Relationships

At the same time that Accountability Dialogues accelerate the implementation of standards and facilitate the use of data to plan improvements, they also upset the traditional ways in which educators have related to parents, the community at large, and one another.

Parent, educator, and community participants report that Accountability Dialogues offer several benefits:

- important new roles for parents;
- increased understanding of the diversity of perspectives about school quality;
- opportunities for open and honest communication; and
- increased sense of shared responsibility and demand from within.

Important New Roles for Parents

In many public schools, parent involvement has largely been confined to fund raising and boosterism. Yet more and more parents are demanding to be involved in substantive educational issues.

> *There is a growing disconnect between the thin layer of the nation's experts, professionals, and leaders, and the general public. Attempts by leaders to sell their viewpoint to a public that has not experienced the same information, discussion, or debate are unlikely to succeed. Today's public will not blindly follow what experts propose; they need to experience the opinion-formation for themselves.*

> *Any successful parental involvement thrust will require a more direct engagement between the school and the home — one that takes into*

consideration the values of the family and of the community (Dykstra and Fege 1997).

Calling on educators to involve parents and the public in "the intrinsically worthy debate over what knowledge, what skills, and what sensibilities we might want to nurture in the young," Dykstra and Fege warn that in failing to do so "we will lose not only parental engagement, but with it, the 'public' in public schools."

Accountability Dialogues foster meaningful and direct engagement of parents in issues that reach the core of their children's educational experience. Increasing numbers of parents have demonstrated great eagerness to participate in this way. Asked at the close of each dialogue session whether they would be willing or interested in participating in similar sessions in the future, well over 90 percent of participating parents said they would. Attendance figures have demonstrated their sincerity. Every school and district has reported increasing levels of attendance with each subsequent dialogue.

Educators participating in Accountability Dialogues have come away with new understandings about the ways in which parents can contribute to a school's efforts to improve student performance. They report being impressed not only by how concerned parents are with student achievement, but by how interested they are to understand the complex factors that influence performance. Educators have also discovered that parents are eager to embrace their own role in increasing student performance. One school leader remarked, "The most important thing that came out of the dialogue is our partnership with the parents and the community. They want to celebrate our successes with us, but they push us with hard questions, too."

Increased Awareness of Diverse Perspectives

By bringing together stakeholders with diverse viewpoints, Accountability Dialogues help participants realize that different stakeholders have very different and equally strongly held perspectives about what a good school is and how their school can be improved. Drawing on this variety of perspectives and

a variety of data, participants come to understand that issues regarding school and student performance are far more complex than any one person or group had previously thought.

Accountability Dialogues provide a forum for exploring difficult issues such as those underlying the gap in achievement levels between white middle-class students and low-income students or students of color. In a dialogue, many perspectives about the root of the problem are shared. Are there differences in the quality of instruction offered to different groups of students? Has one group had better access to an effective intervention program? Are there cultural differences in the way these children experience school? Do teachers have access to culturally relevant curricula? Are some parents less able to provide academic support to their children at home? Do all teachers have the materials they need to teach well? Participants who may have arrived at the session with a single hypothesis about the cause of the problem come to understand that a variety of factors may be in play and that a number of actions may need to be taken. As one parent reported, "I learned that many different things need to be analyzed when evaluating what's going on at our school."

Participants report that the more data a school shares, the more they come to understand what factors and conditions may contribute to student success. "In addition to test scores, we showed attendance figures, tardiness figures, suspension rates, and more," said one organizer of an elementary school dialogue. Added a parent, "We are now asking the right questions in order to get a richer picture of what goes on for kids. It helps us take a proactive stance. If we remain committed to using data to drive instruction, we will continue to make strong growth in student achievement."

New Norms of Honest and Open Conversation

Both educators and parents report going into their first dialogue with trepidation. Parents' worries include "not knowing what it would be about" or "not knowing if I would understand what they are talking about." Educators acknowledge being reluctant to share information that they do not fully understand or that

they have traditionally kept to themselves. As one high school teacher allowed, "I really wasn't looking forward to this. The thought of the faculty being in a fishbowl with a lot of parents around looking at our work scared me to death."

Time and again, however, participants have been surprised by the productive nature of the dialogue. Parents report being extremely appreciative of the school's willingness not only to display the data, but to openly discuss what those data say about how well the school is addressing issues of student achievement. Indeed, even when the data reveal areas of concern, participants have responded not with anger but with an attitude of What can we do about it? One elementary school teacher remarked, "There was a fear that if we shared the data, parents would say, 'Do you know what you're doing?' But it didn't happen. Instead it felt like a true team effort — we were all in it together for the sake of the kids."

Although it is true that this spirit of openness and collective goodwill has yet to be tested by time, for now, at least, a school's willingness to open itself up to public scrutiny has been met with appreciation and support from the larger community.

A Sense of Shared Responsibility and Demand from Within

While top-down accountability mechanisms rely on mandates, coercion, and compliance, an Accountability Dialogue strives to generate momentum from within the system to improve itself. School leaders and community participants in Accountability Dialogues report that "our pronouns are beginning to change." The focus of conversation shifts from what "they" need to do to what actions "we" need to take.

The dialogues generate what might be called a sense of "lateral" accountability: teachers challenge colleagues to change their practice; parents question other parents about what they can do to better support student learning. In one school where reading achievement was lower than expected, teachers themselves decided to disaggregate scores by classrooms in order to determine if teachers participating in a professional development pilot showed a greater

effect on student learning than others. A parent at another school with similarly troubling reading scores called on fellow parents to set up a volunteer program through which adults would come to the school on a regular basis to read to students and listen to them read.

In one districtwide dialogue that extended over a series of meetings, attention focused on the realization that the graduating eighth graders were the entire community's "final exam." In other words, whether students achieved satisfactorily in eighth grade was a reflection not only of the middle school, but also a reflection of the efforts of elementary feeder schools, parents, students, and the larger community. After attending the dialogue held at the middle school, elementary school staffs and parents reported returning to their own sites with a renewed sense of commitment to preparing all students to succeed in middle school.

Increased internal or lateral accountability may also increase the capacity of schools to deal in productive ways with the demands of external accountability mechanisms.

> *Internal accountability includes the norms by which teachers operate, the expectations they hold about student learning and their role in improving it, and the processes they use to carry out their work. In schools with weak internal accountability, the norms emphasize the individual responsibility of each teacher over student learning, rather than the collective responsibility of the entire school. In those cases, teachers' judgments about whether and how much they could improve student learning depend on their understanding of the students' background and lack a perspective of what students could do under different circumstances.*
>
> *Similarly, the expectations for student learning in such schools are relatively low, since teachers believe that the conditions the student brought to school, rather than their own efforts, exert the greatest influence over their academic performance. Teachers in schools with low internal accountability tend to place a greater emphasis on order, an expectation each teacher shares.*

Schools with weak internal accountability therefore tend to respond to external pressures for change by summoning their own individual beliefs, rather than by consulting with colleagues and attempting to work collectively for improvement (Elmore and Rothman 1999).

Several school leaders have described their experiences with Accountability Dialogues as transforming events. Says one, "Our Accountability Dialogues have been the highlight of my educational career. So many people in one room struggling together over what matters for children. Sometimes I despair that we won't find the answers we need, and then I get re-energized by the level of commitment of the people in the room." Another states that she can no longer imagine being a principal in a school that would be unwilling to open itself up to host similar dialogues.

Tackling the Challenges of Conducting Accountability Dialogues

Despite the benefits schools experience from Accountability Dialogues, veterans of planning and conducting these meetings acknowledge the very real challenges they pose. Challenges that can be anticipated when conducting Accountability Dialogues are often the flip side of the benefits yielded by this new approach to school improvement. Planners find that they must

- acknowledge new roles and relationships;
- encourage diverse participation;
- amplify the voice of all participants; and
- integrate dialogue into the ongoing work of the school.

See Appendix A for a checklist to help plan and conduct these dialogues.

Acknowledge New Roles and Relationships

For educators, parents, and the public alike, inviting all stakeholders to identify and solve problems through dialogue is new. Assumptions prevail that accountability can only be realized through top-down mechanisms. Educators have little experience working with their larger community to identify and solve problems; and parents have little experience working on substantive issues of school improvement.

In successful Accountability Dialogues, facilitation of the agenda and the nature of the conversation are not left to chance. Planners allow time in each session to assure that all participants know why they are there, what the school hopes to achieve at this and any future sessions, and how the input gathered from participants will be used. (Examples of overhead transparencies used to introduce the concept and purpose of Accountability Dialogues are included in Appendix B.)

To help the group communicate in productive ways, facilitators often take time to involve everyone in setting norms for the nature of the conversation. They then ask all participants to be guardians of those norms, by both practicing them and by reminding the group when they are not being used. The norm-setting process models the school's commitment to using the dialogue to hear from all interested stakeholders. At the same time, it teaches strategies for making all participants responsible for the success of the session (see Figure 5).

Planners also generally provide a balance of role-alike and cross-role group activities within each session. Time is made available for teachers to talk with other teachers and for parents and community members to talk together — as well as for conversations that include representatives of a variety of role groups. It is not uncommon for the role-alike conversations to lead to an awareness that, despite their similar vantage point, everyone in a given role-group may not think alike — or, in cross-role groups, to discover that there is more agreement across roles than was previously assumed.

Encourage Diverse Participation

Schools report that some of the greatest challenges of Accountability Dialogues involve ensuring broad participation in what is, at first, a new and unfamiliar activity. And even schools that succeed in recruiting diverse stakeholders still face the challenge of assuring that the information shared and the issues discussed are presented in such a way that all participants can contribute productively.

Several schools have found that the term "Accountability Dialogue" is off-putting to potential participants and have changed the name of the event itself, using titles such as "A Community Conversation," "Through a Parent's Eyes," or "An Honest Look at Student Performance." Still others hold onto the term because they feel it symbolizes their commitment to accountability and draws participants who share that interest.

Most schools' first sessions drew few parents or other community members. Those who did attend were generally parents already involved in school activities. Even staff participation was often limited to the principal and a few key

FIGURE 5

Sample Norms for Accountability Dialogues*

Respecting Others

- ✔ Respect various perspectives
- ✔ Replace "but" with "however" and "and"
- ✔ First seek to understand and then to be understood
- ✔ Listen as an ally
- ✔ Don't personalize comments — address ideas, not people
- ✔ Operate on a level of caring acceptance

Taking Responsibility

- ✔ Don't assume prior knowledge
- ✔ Allow time to think — allow for backtracking
- ✔ Offer constructive suggestions about the process
- ✔ Make goals explicit and monitor the group's progress
- ✔ Take individual responsibility for the group's success
- ✔ Set and respect time limits
- ✔ Resist overgeneralizations like "all" and "always"
- ✔ Confidentiality
- ✔ Provide evidence to support assertions: What's the evidence to support that?

Good Communication

- ✔ Be honest and direct — not so "nice" that nothing gets done
- ✔ Avoid jargon and "educationese"
- ✔ Try not to be overly sensitive
- ✔ Listen to each other — leave titles and roles at the door
- ✔ Be nonjudgmental
- ✔ Check for understanding
- ✔ Summarize as you go along

*From one school's Accountability Dialogue

planners. But over time, these same schools found powerful ways to increase participation of both community members and staff. In one school, teachers agreed each to call the five parents with whom they felt they had the least contact during the school year and to encourage their participation. As a result, well over 100 parents attended the next event. When teachers realized that the Accountability Dialogue was a valuable opportunity to hear from the community in new ways, they voluntarily increased their participation. This school has consistently engaged over 100 community members in an annual dialogue and attendance has become an expectation for all staff.

At one high school, low parent turnout for the first Accountability Dialogue was initially explained away as the unwillingness of parents to participate in school events. But, building on feedback from the few parents who did attend that first session, the school targeted the invitations to the next dialogue to parents of the school's newest students and even those in feeder schools. Letters were sent to parents of ninth graders (and of eighth graders from the feeder schools) inviting them to join "a conversation about what will be expected of your student, how the school program prepares students to meet our standards, and what you can do to help assure their success." After retargeting the invitation, the school now struggles to accommodate the large number of parents and students who attend the dialogues.

Increased public engagement in communities comprising families of diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds has brought its own challenges. Planners have realized the need to provide translators at the sessions — one dialogue was conducted simultaneously in English, Spanish, Cantonese, and Korean. Other schools have tried holding, immediately before the more general dialogue session, "affinity group" meetings involving parents and community members representing similar language minority groups or those sharing common interests in a specific issue.

Because the topics discussed at Accountability Dialogues are new to many participants, and often require some background knowledge that may not be shared by all, planners frequently include activities that help the different role groups develop a common understanding of key concepts or terms. For example, many dialogues require all participants to understand the many purposes for assessing student performance and that different assessment tools each have various strengths and weaknesses in meeting these needs. Accordingly, facilitators have designed activities that teach the relevant but specialized concepts of validity and reliability. Participants can then draw on these new understandings in discussing the purpose and quality of the various assessments used to judge student performance in their district or school. (See materials in Appendix C that schools have used to introduce key assessment concepts.)

In opening up to a larger public questions of "how students are doing," Accountability Dialogues have revealed schools' general lack of capacity to gather, manipulate, and use data. As participants learned to ask increasingly sophisticated questions about the conditions that might contribute to improving school performance, they have often been frustrated by the school's inability to produce data to help answer those questions. When data were available, they were often presented in cumbersome or incomprehensible formats. Partially as a result of their efforts to conduct powerful Accountability Dialogues, nearly all schools have invested in new school-level data management and display software, and they are pressuring their districts to develop districtwide data information systems designed to accommodate the complex questions that can arise from dialogue sessions.

Amplify the Voice of All Participants

Schools conducting Accountability Dialogues experience a tension in balancing the goal of broad participation with the goal of using the dialogue to plan targeted action for improvement. Planners are distinctly aware that the time participants can give to dialogues is limited and precious — and that the more people in attendance, the more difficult it is both to hear from them and to draw on all their different ideas to plan action. Yet limiting participation in any way risks cutting off the contributions of some stakeholders who may have a unique perspective on school quality or how to improve it.

Schools have addressed this challenge in different ways. In several schools each table group at a session is assigned a facilitator who is charged with taking notes from the small group's discussion. Notes are typed up and distributed to all session participants for comment before the next session or are reviewed by the faculty in subsequent planning sessions. Many dialogues have made use of individual "Participant Logs," in which participants are asked to record their thoughts and reactions to the discussion periodically throughout the session. Participant Logs are anonymous, but comments are identified as having come from a parent,

community member, or educator. Participant comments from logs are summarized by role group, shared, and used to plan subsequent sessions. Some schools survey or conduct focus groups among various stakeholder groups about the issues to be examined in an upcoming dialogue, and then bring the data from these investigations to the dialogue. In this way the voices of teachers, students, parents, and community members who cannot attend sessions are "heard" and can be considered by those present.

Integrate Dialogue into the Ongoing Work of the School

While planners and participants in Accountability Dialogues almost universally express enthusiasm for the impact these events have had on their school and its work, it is obvious that the future of these dialogues is, at best, tenuous. Planners have often expressed concern about the demands and complexities of planning them, recognizing that the time they spend doing so is time away from other duties or instructional responsibilities. As one planner reports, "We've been astounded by the parent interest and concern the dialogues have generated. But make no mistake about it, a successful dialogue is not easy to pull off. It takes us the better part of a week to put one together. It takes a lot of time to gather data and to think through the best ways to present it. And then there is the need to re-present information from the earlier dialogues [when new participants attend a subsequent session]."

It becomes increasingly clear to those involved in these sessions that in order to perpetuate what seems to be a promising mechanism for accountability, these dialogues must find their way into the routines of school life. They must replace other less powerful activities rather than be "tacked-on" to already overly demanding school schedules. Some schools have considered replacing typical site advisory group agendas or site council agendas with agendas similar to those used in Accountability Dialogues. One district that was committed to a districtwide strategic planning process used site-level dialogues to launch it.

FIGURE 6

Anticipated Outcomes Over Time

Using Accountability Dialogues, schools can anticipate the following outcomes over time:

- ✔ Increased Understanding of Standards
- ✔ Increased Accessibility to Good Data
- ✔ Increased, More Diverse Participation
- ✔ Increasingly Helpful Questions
- ✔ Increasingly Focused Action for Improvement
- ✔ Increased Satisfaction with the Pace and Progress of Improvement

The true measure of the success of Accountability Dialogues will be when they are no longer scheduled as isolated events — when inclusive dialogue about school quality and how to improve becomes a norm of professional and public practice (see Figure 6).

Conclusion

What Do Dialogues Add to the Current Focus on Accountability?

For those who have experienced them, Accountability Dialogues embody many of the characteristics commonly associated with accountability. They promote transparency — the willingness of the school to be open about what it values and how it functions. They demand disclosure — the reporting or accounting of achievement results. And at least in some cases, they have resulted in targeted action to improve student achievement.

Yet for some, no doubt, this mechanism runs counter to notions of "real" accountability. To the degree that these dialogues cloud a sense of who is responsible for school quality and soften the consequences placed on individuals, they will leave some unsatisfied. Still others will dismiss them as too time consuming and complex; simpler notions of accountability — such as management by a system of "rational" and tightly coupled standards, measurements, and consequences — will unquestionably be more attractive.

But studies have shown that external systems of rewards and sanctions may do little to improve student performance in the long run, and that low-achieving school districts are perhaps least able to respond to typical accountability approaches (Macpherson 1998). In one study, for example, the culture of low-achieving school districts was found to be "resistant to the use of coercive power, lacking in culture-changing capacities, and, sadly, encouraged [by traditional accountability mechanisms] not to develop self-transformative capacities" (Ginsberg and Berry 1998).

When accountability measures were seen by these schools as failing to acknowledge the complex factors that influence student achievement, school personnel responded with "denial, selective inattention, aggression, even examples of arrogant disregard of legitimate interests and deceptive manipulation."

Additionally, because these were districts with no history of improvement, their low student achievement, represented by "rational" data, was experienced as a permanent condition, not as a challenge. In fact, the researchers conclude, there is a "real possibility that the politics of accountability in these school districts are part of the problem of low achievement." In schools like these, Accountability Dialogues may be especially important to ameliorate some of the unintended and even counterproductive effects of external, top-down accountability systems.

An Accountability Dialogue is a mechanism that acknowledges the necessary reciprocity of accountability and capacity. If a person with formal authority requires that someone or some group be held accountable for an action or outcome, then the person in authority has an equal and complementary responsibility to assure that the responsible party has the capacity to do what is asked (Elmore 2000). Designed to encourage conversation both within and across role groups, Accountability Dialogues provide a forum through which parents learn to communicate to teachers about the support they need to assist their children. Teachers talk to parents about the support they need from home and to administrators about the training, materials, or other resources they need to accomplish schoolwide goals. Cross-role coalitions grow out of the opportunity provided to share perspectives and needs.

Accountability Dialogues acknowledge that a range of complex factors influence school performance but, at the same time, provide a context for confronting excuses. Well facilitated, they require professionals and community members alike to look critically at evidence and to listen carefully to a variety of perspectives about why things may be as they are. Powerful Accountability Dialogues increase the school's capacity to improve student achievement, both by drawing on a variety of perspectives to identify problems clearly and by building a sense of shared responsibility for addressing them.

The greatest promise of Accountability Dialogues lies in their potential to strengthen the relationships that are essential to sustained school improvement. Educators demand more of each other; parents expect more from their peers. Barriers of language and experience among educators, parents, and the public at large begin to fade. Perhaps most importantly, through dialogue, accountability is

operationalized not only as a set of external management systems but as a shared value or cultural norm of the school and larger community.

Accountability Dialogues are no panacea. They take time and care to organize, and initially they throw professional educators and the public into roles they admit to feeling ill-prepared to accept. But our experience over the past five years suggests that the Accountability Dialogue is a promising mechanism that both acknowledges the complexities of improving student performance and promotes productive responses to very legitimate calls for school improvement.

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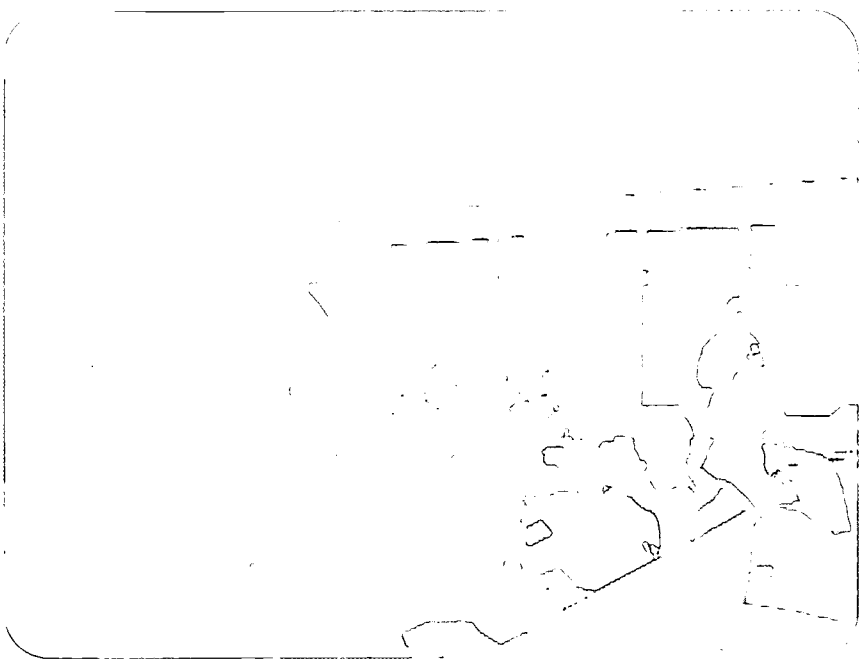
Appendix A

Checklist for Planning and Conducting Accountability Dialogues



Checklist for Planning and Conducting Accountability Dialogues

Schools that have experience with Accountability Dialogues offer the following tips for planning and conducting these events.

Setting a Context for Potential Participants

✔ The purpose of the Accountability Dialogue is to get input from the larger school community about how the school is doing, why things are the way they are, and how they might be improved. When announcing an initial Accountability Dialogue, plan far enough into the future to let participants know how this dialogue fits into a larger picture, what the next steps will be, and when future dialogues will take place.

What Topics Will You Address in Your Accountability Dialogue?

✔ When planning a dialogue, decide what outcomes you hope to achieve. Keep these to a manageable list and be realistic about how much you can learn about, discuss, and agree upon each time people come together.

✔ You may want to accomplish your goals in small steps. The first dialogue might be simply to inform people about the process, provide participants with a "state of the school" report, and generate interest in continued participation.

✔ Often, early dialogues are used to establish a set of standards for school and student performance.

✔ Once the standards are set, later dialogues might explore how the school is doing in relation to these standards and what concerns the community has about that level of achievement. Ideally, the dialogue provides a place for participants to share perspectives and possible explanations for the school's strengths and weaknesses and to offer suggestions about what actions might be taken to improve.

Dialogue sessions have focused on questions such as the following:

- What do we think students in our school should know and be able to do? Are these the same as or different from our state content standards?
- Is _____ a high but realistic performance standard?
- What examples of student work best exemplify our performance standard?
- Are the assessments we use to measure _____ adequate? If not, what

additional information do we need or how would we revise our assessment procedures to give a better picture?

- What do our data tell us about how our students are performing in _____?
- What hunches do we have about the factors that contribute to our patterns of weakness or to our school's strengths? What data might we want to collect to check out those hunches?
- What intervention strategies might we invest in to improve school performance? What is the role of each stakeholder group in the success of that intervention? How will we know if it works?

✔ Remember that dialogue is two-way; it is not merely to inform, gain approval, or rubber-stamp decisions already made. Decide what tasks really do need to be accomplished through deep, open dialogue as a community and be prepared to listen.

How Will You Present and Discuss Data?

✔ Encourage participants to generate questions about school or student performance that they would like to see answered. Early dialogue sessions might, for example, begin with the question, "What data would you like to see in order to understand whether this is a good school?"

✔ In later sessions you may want to encourage participants to generate questions about what is working and not working at the school. For example, a parent might speculate that students seem to do well until the third grade, but then "fall off the track." If enough parents share that speculation, you will want to provide data that help the group find out whether that hunch is true.

✔ Know your data well. The facilitator, staff, and other planners should have examined the data in advance in order to effectively point out strengths and areas of concern and to facilitate the participants' discussion of the data.

✔ Assessment data can be notoriously difficult to understand, so present data as clearly as possible:

- Summarize in advance.
- Provide necessary background (assessments used, when administered, etc.).
- Simplify data displays (charts and graphs).
- Make sure data are clearly formatted, labeled, explained, etc.

✔ Assist participants to understand trends that influence the data, including demographic changes.

- ✔ All data have limitations, therefore, you will want to create space for participants to raise questions and doubts about the data.
- ✔ Separate data-reading from data-interpretation, analysis, and action planning. Be sure that your facilitator is prepared to correct faulty or hastily drawn conclusions.

Who Will Participate and How Will They Be Invited?

- ✔ Make a list of various "stakeholders" in your school community — any group that has an interest in school or student performance and/or plays a role in improving it. Consider what might motivate each of these groups to participate and develop an invitation strategy that addresses those interests. Let people know the nature of their participation, how much time is involved, and what benefits they will receive.
- ✔ In order to encourage the participation of community members and of parents who have been reluctant to participate in school events, work with community leaders to reach those with whom they have contact.
- ✔ Consider how staff will be represented at the event. In some dialogues they have played a listening, clarifying, and recording role while other members of the community did the talking. In other cases, where a good portion of the staff could attend, they participated fully, expressing their own opinions and concerns. Do not expect one or two teachers to "speak for the staff." If staff cannot attend in significant numbers, poll them in advance and bring reliable data about staff opinions to the dialogue session.
- ✔ Involve students whenever possible.
- ✔ Be sure to follow up dialogues with information to participants about what was accomplished because of their involvement, and what remains to be done.

How Will You Build the Capacity of Those Who Attend to Participate Fully?

- ✔ At the start of each session, establish norms or agreements about how participants will communicate their ideas with each other. Ask everyone in the group to take responsibility for following the norms throughout the session.
- ✔ Plan to use some part of an early session to generate ideas about what participants hope to get out of their participation: Is it a desire to help their own children? To learn more about the school? To add their voices to decisions? To express their concerns about what the school is doing? Acknowledge

these various motivations and let participants know how or if those interests will be addressed.

- ✔ Consider what individuals need to know in order to participate fully and appropriately, and make plans to address those needs. For example, parent and community participants may need a glossary of educational terms or a chance to see how an assessment or survey is administered. Everyone might need a chance to practice reading data tables together before being left on their own to discuss what the data say. It might be wise to seat participants at tables where a variety of role groups are represented; in this way, expertise can be shared from one group to another.

- ✔ Provide translations of all materials and/or translators for language minority groups.

- ✔ Arrange for table groups or other small-group formats so that everyone has a chance to speak and to learn from one another. Time may not allow for small groups to record or report out key issues from their discussions, so provide participants with logs in which they can record individual thoughts, opinions, or questions. Be sure to review these logs between sessions and, in your planning, try to acknowledge issues raised.

- ✔ Small things make a big difference. Plan for refreshments, good lighting, adequate ventilation, convenient restrooms, comfortable seating and room temperature, availability of parking or public transportation, and child care.

What Materials and Equipment Need to Be Prepared?

- ✔ Arrange for plenty of clerical/administrative support — beforehand, on the day of the dialogue, and to follow up with documentation and further communication.

- ✔ Have handy all reference documents you might need. If everyone will be using the same materials, make sure you have sufficient copies for every participant. Excerpt or provide summaries of long documents, as needed.

- ✔ Wall charts and/or projected transparencies help all participants focus on similar information. In large rooms, it is best for the facilitator to talk from these large documents or projections while participants look at copies. Microphones and a good sound system are a must in large rooms.

- ✔ If you are using videotapes that require people to listen closely, be sure the sound quality is excellent, pause the tape to repeat a point, or provide listeners with a transcript of the tape.

Who Will Facilitate Your Dialogues, and How?

- ✔ Dialogues can be facilitated by anyone with the time and skill to do so. Although many schools assign the principal this task, others ask a person from the district office, a parent, or a community member to guide the group through its work. A facilitator should have experience conducting large group discussions and the ability to encourage participation, resolve conflict, build consensus, and guide decisionmaking. It is the facilitator's job to remind the group of the norms they established for conversation and to keep the whole group on task.

- ✔ Planners should work with the facilitator to create an agenda that uses time effectively. Establish and honor clear starting times, breaks, and ending times. Include essential elements such as appropriate welcomes, warm-ups, engaging activities, chances for feedback, a sense of closure, and a statement of next steps. Make sure the facilitator lets people know what will be done with the ideas generated at the dialogue and how they can keep track of progress.

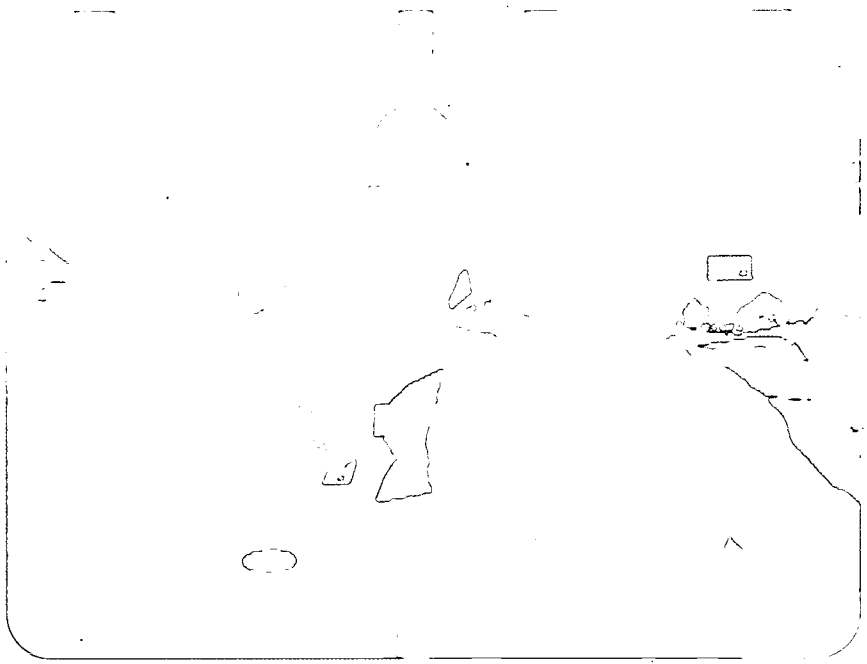
- ✔ When anticipating large numbers of participants, you may want to assign table leaders who can assist in leading small-group discussions, going over materials, debriefing activities, reaching decisions, etc. Plan an orientation session for them in advance of the dialogue so that they understand their responsibilities.

- ✔ Document the event — with videotape, sign-in sheets, evaluation forms, etc. Make these available to those who are interested but could not attend.

- ✔ Soon after any dialogue, convene the planners to reflect on how it went, go over the outcomes and what was accomplished, and note ideas for improvement. Keep a journal, portfolio, or other record of what you do, what you learn, and to reflect on your progress.

Appendix B

Overheads to Introduce Concepts of Accountability and Accountability Dialogues*



* Permission to copy these overheads is hereby granted. The Western Assessment Collaborative at WestEd invites you to use them in conducting Accountability Dialogues.

From Accounting to Accountability

Assessment for ACCOUNTING

"Accounting refers to the act of gathering, organizing, and making available for use any of a variety of information describing the performance of the system."

Assessment for ACCOUNTABILITY

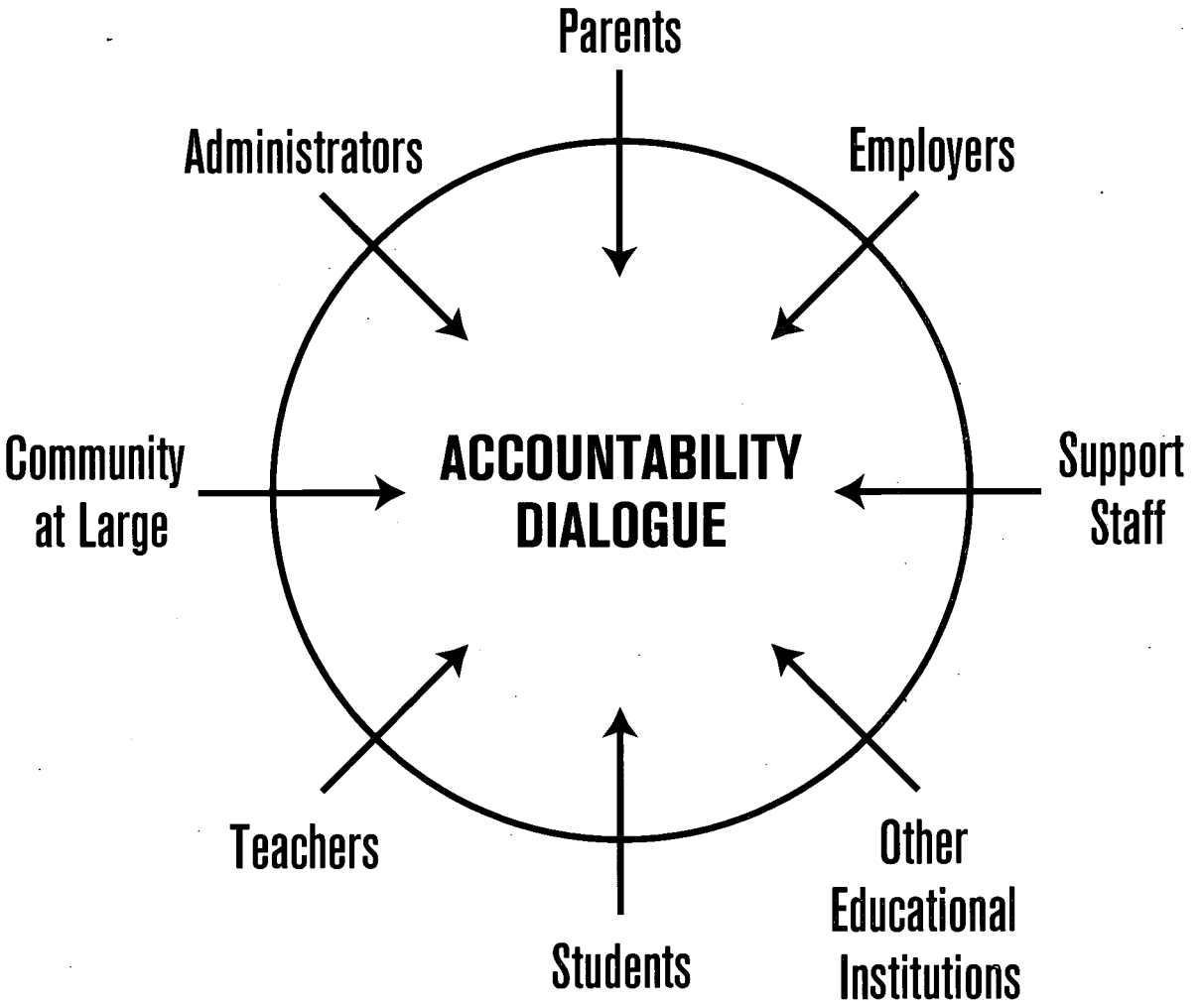
"Accountability takes that information and uses it to inform judgments about performance and how it can be improved — including planning and action."

ACCOUNTABILITY DIALOGUES

"The goal is to involve various constituencies in the construction of deep and commonly held understandings about the performance of the system, the reasons for the performance, the best possible ways of improving performance, and the responsibilities of each in doing so."

– Paul G. LeMahieu
"From Authentic Assessment to Authentic Accountability"

Stakeholders



New Ways to Think about Accountability

Not ...	*But ...*
Blame	**Responsible Action**
Reporting	**Dialogue**
Hierarchical	**Lateral and Shared**
Only External	**Also from Within**

Accountability Dialogues

Anticipated Outcomes Over Time

- ✔ Increased Understanding of Standards
- ✔ Increased Accessibility to Good Data
- ✔ Increased, More Diverse Participation
- ✔ Increasingly Helpful Questions
- ✔ Increasingly Focused Action for Improvement
- ✔ Increased Satisfaction with the Pace and Progress of Improvement

Appendix C

Materials for Assisting Participants to Look at Student Performance Data*

* Permission to copy these materials is hereby granted. The Western Assessment Collaborative at WestEd invites you to use them in conducting Accountability Dialogues.

Accountability Dialogues

How Good Are Our Data?

Validity

Does the information come from a procedure (or set of procedures) that actually measures what it intends to measure?

Reliability

Is the information trustworthy?

Fairness

Does the information result from procedures that are appropriate for people of all backgrounds and needs?

Usefulness

Are the data useful to those decisionmakers who need them to do their work well?

Appropriate Use

Are the data used fairly and appropriately?

Adapted from "Moving Up to Complex Assessment Systems," Proceedings from the 1996 CRESST Conference published in *Evaluation Comment*, a publication of UCLA's National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing

Crash Gordon Takes a Test

Crash Gordon has been enrolled in Fly-by-Nite Pilot School for three weeks. The school promises that by successfully completing the course, Crash will be ready to pilot 747 commercial jets. Crash has been told that Fly-by-Nite is a highly regarded school. Its ads report that nearly 95% of Fly-by-Nite graduates score above average on the final exam. The school is also known for its low tuition costs. Five years ago Fly-by-Nite replaced its expensive flight simulators with textbooks and films that explain in detail what anyone might want to know about flying a plane.

Today is Crash's mid-term exam. If he passes with a grade higher than 50 points he can skip the rest of the course and will get his license right away. If he scores from 25-50 he will need to repeat the course, and if he doesn't complete the exam or scores below 25, he will be kicked out of Fly-by-Nite. The stakes are high.

Crash has no idea what will be on the test. He arrives a little early and is handed a computer disk on which, he is told, the questions have been recorded. Crash feels really lucky that he happens to have his laptop computer in the car, and he goes to get it. On his way back he meets several of his classmates who are leaving dejectedly. They have been told they cannot take the test without a computer. Among them is Crash's good friend Yoshi, who has been flying 747s for the Japanese Air Force for 10 years. The battery in Yoshi's computer is dead. Yoshi will flunk out of Fly-by-Night. Crash offers sympathy to his friend and then moves quickly to a seat near one of the few electrical outlets in the room.

Crash boots up his exam and finds 100 multiple-choice questions which he needs to answer in 30 minutes. Approximately one-third of the questions are about the parts of a plane, another third are about how to read a flight schedule, and the final third cover various aspects of the dress code for pilots. None of these topics has been covered in the course. About one-half of the questions in each section are written in French or Spanish. Crash figures this is because 747s usually fly international routes. The final question asks for a brief written answer to the question, "Who has most influenced your life as an aviator? Explain."

Crash is not daunted by the test. As soon as he realizes that he will need to answer the items quickly, he develops a plan for filling in the answers according to a pattern. He decides that every fourth question will be "A," every third question "B," and so on. Knowing that his teacher, Mr. Soar, will be scoring the exam, Crash uses the brief essay to explain how much Soar's teaching has meant to his career. Crash finishes the exam with three minutes to spare.

When the exam scores are posted on the bulletin board at Fly-by-Nite, Crash is elated. His test-taking strategy has paid off. The roster shows that Crash got 29 points. He is especially pleased to note that the average score on the test was 27 — being above average gives Crash the confidence that he will do better next time. Crash leaves Fly-by-Nite eager to improve and become a pilot. He decides to go on to the airport and sit near the crew lounge for an hour or so. This way, he reasons, he'll learn a lot about pilot dress code.

Using Crash Gordon to Think about the Quality of Our Own Assessments

Think about and discuss:

1. What problems can you identify in terms of the validity, reliability, fairness, usefulness, and appropriate use of the data generated by Crash's assessment?

2. Before looking at the data from the assessments your school is using, take time to consider each assessment according to the characteristics of good data. You may find that each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Key Questions to Structure Discussions about Data

1. What do these data tell us about performance at our school?

2. What questions do we have about these data?

This book explains some of the common misperceptions about school accountability and provides a strong rationale for including Accountability Dialogues in any accountability system. Not only do Accountability Dialogues propel efforts to implement standards-based reforms, they also strengthen the relationships among parents, educators, and the community at large.

Stories and examples from schools that use Accountability Dialogues provide a real sense of what can happen when responsibility for school improvement is shared among all the stakeholders in a school community.

This book and a companion videotape have been developed from the work of the Western Assessment Collaborative at WestEd.

"In all the talk about school accountability, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that, fundamentally, schools have to be accountable to parents and communities. Accountability Dialogues are a practical strategy to make this kind of accountability real."

— Merrill Vargo
Executive Director
Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC)

"Clear and common sense thinking about this important educational issue that is all too often politicized beyond recognition."

— Terry Mazany
Associate Superintendent
Southfield Public School District
Southfield, Michigan

"Such important work to help school systems! The lasting result of Accountability Dialogues for schools and districts is increasing their capacity to move beyond the quick fix – to dig deeper and to take strategic action to make real change."

— Karen Schauer
Curriculum Director
Galt Joint Union Elementary School District
Galt, California

"Accountability without a process of engaging stakeholders at the school level is an empty box. The Western Assessment Collaborative has gone a long way toward filling this space with a structured, humane, and reasoned approach. Accountability Dialogues avoid past pitfalls and enable practitioners and community members to see accountability using a common lens, vocabulary, and interests."

— Rudy Crew
Director of the Institute for K-12 Leadership
Former New York City Schools Chancellor

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